

JESSICA L. HARLAND-JACOBS. *Builders of Empire: Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717–1927*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007, pp. xiv+384. ISBN: 978-0-8078-3088-8 (HC), \$39.95

This book written by Jessica L. Harland-Jacobs, professor of history at the University of Florida, provides us with an important new perspective on British imperialism both in Britain and its colonial outposts. This is probably the first book to study Freemasonry in a global world context and is reminiscent of another significant work, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730–1840*, which was written by Steven C. Bullock and published almost 10 years ago by the same University of North Carolina Press (Bullock 1996).<sup>1</sup> This is a much demanded and long-neglected subject based on very rich documentary records.

The book consists of a useful introduction, seven chapters and a conclusion. Prof Harland-Jacobs raises a crucial question. What were the salient characteristics and primary functions of this global institution? She vividly argues that Freemasonry was a quintessential builder of empire, creating some of the first communal structures on the frontiers of the British Empire. During the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, the brotherhood became a global institution, expanding as the colonial empire expanded. She reveals how, originally identified with the ideals of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, universal brotherhood, tolerance, benevolence, and sociability, Masonry spread to five continents and its claims of cosmopolitan brotherhood ('Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth') were put to the test and underwent significant changes. As the Catholic Church waged a sustained campaign against worldwide Freemasonry, the brotherhood became primarily a Protestant institution.<sup>2</sup> Theoretically championing an ideology of openness, in practice the brotherhood shied away from its radical past and, strengthened by the currents of nationalism, capitalism and imperialism emerged as a loyal Protestant brotherhood.

The author of this fascinating book states that when British Freemasons began admitting indigenous elites towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they did so primarily on the grounds that native participation in Masonry would strengthen the imperial state. Masonry had earned a well-deserved reputation for being an institution that offered its members a passport to countless benefits available in all parts of the empire and

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<sup>1</sup> However, the author of this book is more concerned with the revolutionary brotherhood's role in colonial North America's transition to democracy than with examining Freemasonry as an imperial institution.

<sup>2</sup> As Peter van der Veer suggests, 'In the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain, as a Christian nation, comes to be characterized by a muscular Christianity based on a gendered notion of racial superiority' (Veer 2001, 59).

throughout the world. Freemasonry served to create a vigorous bond of unity which more closely connected colonies with England than any other bond possibly devised. Especially remarkable, in this context, is a quotation by Lord Carnarvon, former secretary of state for the colonies and high-ranking Masonic official: 'Following closely in the wake of colonisation, wherever the hut of the settler has been built, or the flag of conquest waved, there Masonry has soon equal dominion ... It has reflected and consolidated the British Empire' (p. 4). Often a Masonic lodge or hall was among the first community buildings constructed in colonial frontier settlements and became a centre of community life.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the fraternity remained a relatively fluid and inclusive institution. Even though dominated by white Protestant men, 18<sup>th</sup>-century British Masonry did have room in its lodges for Jews, Parsis and Muslims; African Americans; and South Asians. At that time, this institution claimed to admit men of any religious, political, ethnic, or racial background. To preserve a tolerant environment, the rules of the order forbade the discussion of politics and religion within the lodge. Masonry underwent a major transformation in Britain, having withstood the age of French revolution and emerging victorious from the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>3</sup> Those transformations reflected the strengthening currents of nationalism, capitalism, and imperialism.

Prof. Harland-Jacobs' analysis of Freemasonry across two centuries and multiple geographic sites bears on five interconnected themes that run through this study: globalisation, supranational institutions and identities, imperial power, masculinity, and fraternalism. She argues that the Freemasons established one of the first, if not the first, global institutional socio-cultural networks maintaining immense authority over vastly larger numbers of Asians and Africans, primarily by connecting Masonry to that crucial institution of empire building, the British army. It also helped them build an identity that bound them together within the colony and linked them to Britain and the wider empire. Its fraternal ideology—and frequent recourse to family idioms—helped ensure that Dominion nationalism remained compatible with imperialism.

The central hinge upon which the story of *Builders of Empire* unfolds is the examination of the fate of Freemasonry's inclusive promise in the diverse historical circumstances presented by the British Empire. How is it possible to explain the colonial success of Masonic activities? Through meticulous research of sources and archives, Jessica L. Harland-Jacobs explains 'The primary mechanism responsible

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<sup>3</sup> The strain and the broken-off communications between the Grand Lodge of England and so called international 'Latin Masonry' was officially caused by the decision of the Grand Orient of France to admit atheists into the brotherhood in 1878. Notwithstanding, I guess that the clash of the geopolitical interests of two powerful colonial empires also played a significant role in it. It served to promote Anglo-Saxon unity (or the English-speaking Masonry of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales) of Freemasonry as well, even the Empire Grand Lodge never materialised.

for the building of the expansive work of lodges was the regimental lodge. By the early nineteenth century, every regiment in the British army boasted at least one lodge that accompanied it on its imperial sojourns. Freemasons in the army helped plant permanent lodges among civilian populations in colonial of all types. Exposed to Freemasonry in the British Isles, nineteenth-century emigrants also directly exported the brotherhood by requesting warrants to set up their own lodges in their new homes in North America, Australasia, and Southern Africa. ... The three mechanisms—regimental lodges, the processes of migration, and provincial grand lodges—combined to effect the proliferation of a vast network of lodges that connected men across the formal and informal empires' (pp. 2–3). Thus, taken together, the rituals, teachings, symbols, passwords, and handgrips constituted a Masonic *lingua franca* spoken in both the metropolis and the colonies.

Just some eloquent statistics: the global network of lodges was started in the late 1720s with lodges in Gibraltar and Calcutta. Over 820 British lodges were at work throughout the empire by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 1930, the number of Scottish lodges in South Asia alone had grown to 78 and the number of English lodges to 229 (Gupta 1981). Grand lodge officials fought and won a struggle to gain control over the brotherhood by consciously identifying the brotherhood with loyalty to the state. At that time, Masonry already had a strong presence in the official institutions of empire, especially the army, the monarchy, and the colonial service, and provided both colonists and imperial functionaries with a means of navigating their careers.

The author of this book asks the problematic question: how did metropolitan authorities react to concurrent developments in colonies? Indians celebrated Freemasonry's ability to bring 'the whole human race into one family', but the majority of British Masons in India refused to 'hold out the hand of brotherhood' to indigenous candidates until forced by metropolitan authorities to do so.<sup>4</sup> Often they did so only on the grounds that their participation would help rise up childlike natives 'to the high level of European civilization and culture' (p. 205) and introduce 'true religion and enlightenment' (p. 230). Native, indigenous elites of the imperial periphery (primarily some Indian Muslim princes) were attracted to Masonry because of its official ideology of cosmopolitan brotherhood, intellectual stimulation, and spiritual cultivation but were reluctantly admitted only because British Masons believed it would help strengthen the empire.

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<sup>4</sup> The first Hindu admitted into an English lodge (Lodge Anchor and Hope) in Bengal, 1872 was a merchant named Prosonno Coomar Dutt. This occurred in Bengal in 1872. However, it took 9 years of relentless petitioning claiming his right to admission. See 'Freemasonry comes to India' from the website of the Grand Lodge of AF & AM of India <<http://www.masonindia.org/index6.html>>.

A central argument for admitting, for instance, Hindus to brotherhood was the belief that the lodge might serve as a factory for building collaborators who would be loyal to the empire and who would help keep India subordinated within the empire. The enthusiasm with which elite Indian men joined Freemasonry suggests that Masonry did indeed contribute to this process (Walker 1979). However, as the author of this book emphasises: ‘But indigenes had many different responses to imperial rule, responses that are much harder to gauge than the intentions of the powerful. What looked like collaboration might also have elements of manipulation. An indigenous man might join the brotherhood to endear himself to the British, but he might also use the brotherhood’s ideology of cosmopolitan fraternalism to challenge the “rule of colonial difference” that underlay imperial power and to demand equality with his British “brothers”’ (p. 14). In other words, an institution that helped extend imperial power (in its material, ceremonial, and hegemonic forms) was also used to contest the legitimacy of that authority.

Thus, while the decisions taken in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a more multicultural brotherhood in the 20<sup>th</sup>, the tension between masonry’s inclusive ideology and its members’ exclusive practices remained unsolved. Harland-Jacobs concludes that Freemasonry was fundamentally imperial in its functions and fraternal in nature. At the same time, she briefly remarks that both nationalists and British Masons found in Freemasonry resources for dealing with the era of decolonization (p. 297).<sup>5</sup> Still this remains matter in need of further investigation.

Evidently, writing such a significant book was possible only with the openness and helpfulness of members of the brotherhood, as well as Masonic archivists and librarians, including the abundant Oriental and India Office Collections at the British Library. The study is supported by an amazingly rich collection of documents, impressive illustrations and diagrams. The exhaustive bibliography of original sources and modern critical studies together with a useful index conclude the book.

The book not only tells us brilliantly the story of British imperial Freemasonry but also offers new ways to think about the global history of imperialism during the transitional era from proto-globalisation to modern globalisation. It certainly provides the new perspectives to our understanding the historiography of trans-national colonialism.

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that another Western ‘universal brotherhood’ movement—the Theosophical Society, founded at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Mme H. Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott and successfully attracting intellectual Indian elite—strongly expressed anti-colonial and anti-Christian ideas and supported Hindu and Buddhist nationalist movements in India and South Asia. We could say it was kind of competitive ‘universal brotherhood’.

## References

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